

John Lott Jr: Weapons bans miss the mark

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AUSTRALIANS are a dangerous lot. Weapons that would hardly cause a second thought in the hands of a citizen in another country generate concern when held by an Australian.

Fortunately, some Australian state governments have understood the dangers of letting ordinary Australians get access to weapons such as laser pointers, a popular device for making business and academic presentations in countries such as the US.

Americans may feel safe when an academic addresses a conference using a laser pointer. In the hands of an Australian, however, there is understandable fear that these devices could do untold harm. An Australian academic with a laser pointer would cause real panic.

Now the Victorian Government is achieving international recognition for protecting Australians from a danger that has been around for far too long: swords. After July 1, swords will be banned and violators will face penalties that previously have been reserved for laser pointers - six months in jail and a \$12,000 fine.

Swords are broadly defined as a cutting or thrusting weapon with a long blade, a hilt and one or two sharp edges. Although this unfortunately exempts knives with either no sharp or three or more sharp edges, or knives without handles, not specifying a blade length in the legislation hopefully ensures many knives will be banned.

A licensing process will be set up so that a select few will be granted an exemption and pay a \$135 fee, but they will have to lock their weapons in sturdy safes and put in burglar alarms. If properly enforced, the law could produce other benefits, such as ensuring that dishes are promptly washed after dinner so that any offending steak knives can be placed back in their safe. On the downside, the knives would still be available during dinner when many family arguments might get out of hand. It is also not clear if the family will be able to use the knives if the licence holder is not present.

And if Australians can't be trusted with laser pointers or swords, they surely can't be trusted with guns. Citizens in other countries are obviously much more trustworthy. Americans, for example, can own all these items. Indeed, 46 states in the US even trust millions of law-abiding Americans to carry concealed handguns when walking on the street or eating in restaurants.

And, yes, in most states an academic addressing a conference or a class can carry a gun along with a laser pointer. Over the decades, concealed handgun permit holders in the US have proven to be extremely law-abiding, losing their permits at only hundredths of thousandths of one percentage point for any type of firearms related violation.

If dangerous weapons made citizens in other countries dangerous, no one would visit Switzerland. There, all able-bodied men between the ages of 20 and 42 are trusted to keep a machinegun in their homes as part of their military service. (Not the wimpy centre-fire semi-automatic rifles everyone is afraid to trust Australians with.) Yet the trust in the Swiss is well placed. Switzerland has one of the lowest murder rates in Europe.

Letting law-abiding citizens in the US and Switzerland own guns lowers crime because would-be victims are able to deter criminals or, if confronted, protect themselves. Australians are clearly quite different. They understand the risks of letting Australians own guns. The International Crime Victimization Survey shows that Australia's violent crime rate is already twice that of the US or Switzerland. Australia's violent crime rate is about as high as England's, a country that bans handguns.

It would be simple enough just to blame Australia's high crime rates on its largely English heritage or its convict history, but for much of the past century Australia had lower crime rates than the US or the UK. Violent crime rates have gone up dramatically in Australia since the 1996 Port Arthur gun control measures. And violent crime rates averaged 20 per cent higher in the six years after the law was passed (from 1997 to 2002) than they did in 1996, 32 per cent higher than the violent crime rates in 1995. The same comparisons for armed robbery rates showed increases of 67 per cent and 74 per cent, respectively; for aggravated assault, 20 per cent and 32 per cent; for rape, 11 per cent and 12 per cent; murder, attempted murder and manslaughter rose by 5 per cent in both cases.

Perhaps six years of crime data is just not enough to evaluate the experience. Yet Australian governments seem to believe that if gun controls don't work at first, more and stricter regulations (like getting rid of swords) are surely the solution. Remember, never second-guess government regulations.

While the ban on swords is modelled on the gun control measures, the Victorian Government obviously hopes that its new measure is more successful in reducing crime. Australian gun laws also require people to lock their guns in safes and ban many types of guns. But requiring an alarm for storing any swords, unlike the 15 or more rule for guns in Victoria, is a nice touch and may make the crucial difference.

Metal swords have been around since the Bronze Age, 4600 years ago. Yet citizens in few countries have so clearly posed dangers to themselves and it is fortunate that Victoria recognises this.

Possibly, Australians can turn now to solving some really important problems. One suggestion: 240-volt electrical currents can kill you. Is it really true that Australians have these overpowering urges to try sticking metal in electrical sockets?

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